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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a critical analysis of African American adolescents who achieve academically and explores the coping strategies these individuals employ to achieve academic success. It is hypothesized that African American adolescents achieve because they possess intrinsic values such as persistence and patience, or perhaps they are socialized to believe that academic achievement is paramount. It is suggested that their coping strategies enable them to achieve academically, and that most of these strategies are culture specific. Types of acculturation are examined and it is postulated that: (1) high achievers are academically successful because they acculturate to the school culture; (2) high achievers exhibit two typological patterns of acculturation (they either make a cultural shift or they culturally incorporate the school culture while retaining their own culture); and (3) there will be a correlation between type of acculturation and ethnic identity. It is recommended that future research examine those variables which account for high academic achievement among African American adolescents. (Author/NB)

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Coping Strategies of Resilient African American Adolescents

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical analysis of African American adolescents who achieve academically and explores the coping strategies these individuals employ to achieve academic success. The presenter hypothesizes that African American adolescents achieve because they possess intrinsic values such as persistence and patience, or perhaps they are socialized to believe that academic achievement is paramount. It would seem that their coping strategies enable them to achieve academically. This presenter believes that most of these strategies are culture specific. Type of acculturation is the culture specific variable that this presenter will be looking at in this paper. The presenter hypothesizes that high achievers are academically successful because they acculturate to the school culture. It is believed that they exhibit two typological patterns of acculturation; that is, they either make a cultural shift or they culturally incorporate the school culture while retaining their own culture. In addition, it is hypothesized there will be a correlation between type of acculturation and ethnic identity. It is

recommended that future research examine those variables which account for high academic achievement among African American adolescents. If these variables are discerned, then they can be instituted into the educational system to assist educators, teachers, and researchers in developing programs that will help individuals, who fail to achieve academically.

Introduction

This paper presentation will provide a critical analysis of the research on academic achievement in African Americans, expand on the cultural difference model, and identify the coping strategies academically successful African Americans employ to achieve academic success.

Statement of the Problem

Academic underachievement or failure among African American adolescents has reached crisis proportions (Banks, 1988). African American adolescents are more likely than their White counterparts to underachieve in school (Banks, 1988), become at-risk, and drop-out (Paulu, 1987). In 1989, the average drop-out rate[1] was 23.2% for African American adolescents between the ages of 15 and 24 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1989). Yet, despite these statistics, many African American adolescents remain in school and are high academic achievers (Lee, 1985).

Although the educational problems of African American youth have been investigated extensively (e.g., Banks, 1988), few studies have examined

academically successful African Americans (e.g., Lee, 1985; Pollard, 1989). Most research has focused solely on African American adolescents who fail to achieve academically. This research provided inadequate explanations for African Americans poor scholastic achievement, such as theories of biological inferiority or cultural deprivation (Banks, 1988; Comer, 1988; Lewis, 1970).

The Cultural Difference Model

Critics of these theories argued that they promoted assimilation and violated the cultural integrity of African Americans (Banks, 1988). These critics or theorists have endorsed a cultural difference model (e.g., Banks, 1988; Henderson & Washington, 1975; Shade, 1982). According to this model, African Americans have cognitive, learning, and motivational styles which are different from those fostered in the schools (Banks, 1988; Shade, 1982).

Ramirez & Price-Williams's (1974) research provided support for the cultural difference model in that African Americans were found to have a cognitive style that's different from the one advocated in the

schools. Most educational environments and achievement and intelligence tests used in educational settings are biased in the direction of field-independence (Cohen, 1969). Ramirez & Price-Williams (1974) found that African American children have a field-dependent or relational cognitive style. This style is incompatible with the analytical style required in the school system (Hale, 1982). In addition, the school system denigrates Black culture (Comer, 1988; Lewis, 1970). For example, positive African American role models and contributions made by African Americans are excluded from the textbooks, and less experienced teachers are typically assigned to predominantly Black schools (Comer, 1988; Lewis, 1970).

However, many African American adolescents achieve in school even though they are culturally different from the school culture and experience subtle and overt rejection by the school system (Ogbu, 1981, 1983, 1985, 1991). The cultural difference model fails to explain why they do. Moreover, it doesn't account for other minorities who do well in school even though their cultures and languages aren't similar to White American

culture (Ogbu, 1991). Thus, the cultural difference model, like the other theories, doesn't adequately address the problem of academic underachievement in African American adolescents (Ogbu, 1981, 1983, 1985, 1991).

Hence, it would appear that researchers need to investigate those variables which account for high academic achievement among African Americans to help those who fail to achieve academically. Moreover, identifying success variables for African Americans can lead to the development of theories and models of academic success for this group.

Ethnic Identity, Acculturation, and School Achievement

Research that has identified academically successful African Americans (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Lee, 1985; Ogbu, 1991; Pollard, 1989) found that ethnic identity and type of acculturation are related to school achievement. Findings from these studies suggest that academic achievement may require having a limited Black consciousness (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Lee, 1985) or crossing cultural boundaries (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1981, 1983, 1985, 1991;

Pollard, 1989). However, these studies either haven't attempted to empirically assess ethnic identity and acculturation in relation to academic achievement (e.g., Lee, 1985; Pollard, 1989), or they used the case study methodology (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) whose validity as a measure of ethnic identity and acculturation is questionable. This makes it difficult to draw conclusions concerning the influence of ethnic identity and acculturation on academic achievement.

Moreover, few studies have examined ethnic identity in adolescents. Those which have used widely discrepant definitions and measures of ethnic identity, which makes generalizations and comparisons across studies difficult and ambiguous (Phinney, 1990). It seems acculturation has been used as a framework for studying ethnic identity in African Americans. This framework suggests that for understanding ethnic identity, it's necessary to consider the individual's relationship to the dominant group (Phinney, 1990). It appears most ethnic identity studies with African Americans assessed their attitudes toward their own group and toward the dominant group (e.g., Parham &

Helms, 1981). Also, it seems most ethnic identity studies used a linear, bipolar model in assessing ethnic identity. In the linear model, ethnic identity is conceptualized along a continnum from strong ties at one extreme to strong ties at the other. The assumption underlying this model is that a strengthening of one requires a weakening of the other (Phinney, 1990). The problem with this assumption is whether ethnic identity is directly related to acculturation, or whether it's independent. ~~It is believed that the two are independent~~.

Ethnic identity refers to how individuals relate to their own group as a subgroup of the larger society (Phinney, 1990). Acculturation refers to the process of acquiring the cultural attitudes, values, and behaviors of an alternate society while retaining native cultural customs. It results from contact between two distinct cultures (Mendoza & Martinez, 1981). Mendoza & Martinez (1981) described four typological patterns of acculturation: 1) cultural resistance, either actively or passively resisting acquiring alternate cultural norms while maintaining

native customs; 2) cultural shift, substituting alternate cultural norms for native customs; 3) cultural incorporation, adapting customs from both native and alternate cultures; and 4) cultural transmutation, altering native and alternate cultural practices to create a unique subcultural entity. Acculturation is multidimensional and contextual; that is, individuals may display cultural resistance in one setting, cultural shift in another setting, etc..

Hypotheses

It could be hypothesized that African American adolescents, who underachieve in school, exhibit a culturally resistant typological pattern of acculturation. Ogbu (1981, 1983, 1985, 1991), an anthropologist who has examined academic achievement in African American adolescents, believes that African American youths, who underachieve in school, perceive school success as rejecting their Black culture; therefore, they are resistant to achieving in school because they associate school success with the White culture. This explanation is inadequate because it only partially explains academic underachievement in

African Americans, and it seems to place the blame of academic underachievement solely on African American youths. African American adolescents maybe culturally resistant to acquiring alternate values and belief systems or the school system's norms because they don't value an educational system that defines their culture as deviant. In addition, though, it's possible they find it difficult to master a system that doesn't support or encourage their achievement. As African American children proceed from one grade to another, they become increasingly aware that their academic capabilities have already been prejudged (Gray, 1982). In Shade & Edwards's (1987) literature review on the educative style of African American children, they found in many studies that in urban areas teachers of African American children spend a great deal of time on classroom management and behavioral conformity and respond best to children who are personable, regardless of their academic skills. However, those same teachers reinforce Euro-American children for academic performance.

Although low achieving African American

adolescents maybe culturally resistant to the school culture, it could be hypothesized that academically successful African American youth cope with cultural discontinuities in school by conforming to the school system's cultural norms. Fine (1983) found that students who remained in school were hesitant to challenge inequity and presented socially desirable selves.

It is hypothesized that academically successful African Americans exhibit two typological patterns of acculturation. They either substitute alternate cultural norms for native customs (i.e., cultural shift) or adapt customs from both native and alternate cultures (i.e., cultural incorporation). Some African American high achievers adopt a racelessness stance to succeed; that is, they alienate themselves from Black culture within as well as outside of the school setting and totally assimilate White culture (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Other high achievers accomodate to the school culture, but simultaneously maintain strong ties to their Black culture (Pollard, 1989). It would appear those African Americans, who

adopt a racelessness stance, exhibit a cultural shift typological pattern of acculturation, while those who accomodate display a cultural incorporation pattern of acculturation.

Recommendations for Future Research

Hence, future research should examine academically successful African American adolescents to find out what variables account for high academic achievement among these individuals. If those variables are discerned, then they can be instituted into the educational system to assist educators, teachers, and researchers in developing programs that will help those individuals, who fail to achieve academically.

It appears African American adolescents, who academically succeed or fail, experience some kind of cultural conflict with the school system as the cultural difference model advocates, but academically successful African Americans cope with these cultural discontinuities differently from those who underachieve (Ogbu, 1991).

It is hypothesized that academically successful African American adolescents cope by acculturating to

the school culture at least while they are in that environment. It is believed that they exhibit two typological patterns of acculturation, either cultural shift or cultural incorporation. It is also hypothesized that there is a correlation between type of acculturation and ethnic identity; that is, African American adolescents who culturally shift will have a low ethnic identity, while those who are culturally resistant or culturally incorporate will have a high ethnic identity.

In conclusion, academically successful African American adolescents appear to have the flexibility to adapt to a different, and what some may call a "culturally insensitive" environment to be academically successful. This presenter isn't advocating that African American adolescents accomodate to the school culture. However, it is believed that unless they do, they will not be academically successful. What this adaptation does to them psychologically is another question!

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Footnote

[4]The dropout rate used was the event dropout rate. Event dropout rates represent the share of students who leave school without completing high school during a single year.